

**THE LEGACY OF LEAVING CARE UNPREPARED:
USING PAST PRACTICE TO INFORM CURRENT POLICY.**

Hello. My name is Leonie Sheedy and I am the Executive Officer and cofounder of Care Leavers Australia Network otherwise known as CLAN. CLAN is a support, advocacy, research, and training network for anyone who spent time in Orphanages, Children's Homes, Foster Care and other Institutions in Australia. CLAN represents the 500 000 plus Australians who are known as older Care Leavers or the 'Forgotten Australians' and who received a Federal Apology on the 16th November 2009.

Being a Care Leaver myself I was amazed at the lack of support out there for people who have left care and who are now suffering through the enduring legacy of leaving care unprepared. There was a very real need for support for Care Leavers, and for advocacy on their behalf. This is what prompted Dr Joanna Penglase and I to co-found CLAN 11yrs ago.

Having worked with thousands of Care Leavers for the last 11 years it has become all too apparent that most Care Leavers left the child welfare system with no preparation for the outside world and no support to deal with the issues they may be having as a result of being in 'care'. For many, the result has been a legacy of chronic disadvantage and continuing social exclusion.

It is CLAN's sincere hope that the mistakes of the past are examined and that we can learn from history so that the child protection system may use past practice to inform current policy.

This brings us to the question of why preparation to leave care is needed and why support and assistance upon leaving care is essential. Childhood is the most vital stage of development in the life stages of humans. It is during childhood where we are not only constantly learning, but we are forming important attachments that help to serve us throughout the rest of our development. Childhood is also the time we are at our most vulnerable. It is the combination of these three factors that make children in care an extremely vulnerable group. All children who are in care have experienced disruption of their family. This in turn impacts upon a child's attachment and bonding with their parents and others. Trust may be broken, learning may have been disrupted and in some cases a child's vulnerability may have been taken advantage of in the form of abuse. It is precisely for these reasons that children who are in care need preparation and time to transition to either return home or to get out into the world on their own. It is also at this stage where support and assistance to leave care becomes essential. Without these things, damaged children are left to turn into damaged adults facing a lifetime of disadvantage at a huge cost to themselves and society.

CLAN is in the unique position of being able to research Care Leaver experiences through our membership base. We first performed extensive research in a 2007-08 survey called *A Terrible Way to Grow up: The experience of institutional care and its outcomes for Care Leavers in Australia*. In April 2010 we expanded upon this research with a second survey called *Struggling to keep it together*. It has been through this research that CLAN has been able to demonstrate the effects and outcomes of leaving care unprepared and without support and assistance.

In April 2010 a comprehensive survey was posted to CLAN's Care Leaver members which was close to 1000 members at the time. The survey comprised 67 questions with some being quite long and

complex. Most questions were also accompanied by an invitation to make an additional comments if they wished. Due to the sensitive nature of the survey and the emotional component of some of the questions, the members were encouraged to seek support and assistance from CLAN's counsellor. There was no fixed deadline for the survey to be returned, however there was a very prompt response to the mail out with CLAN receiving 80 responses in one day. All in all CLAN received 577 responses, a wonderful response rate and an increase in respondents compared with the first CLAN survey.

To give you some idea about the demographics of respondents:

- 56% are female,
- 85% are over 50 years of age,
- 37% are married or have a defacto partner and
- 80% reside in NSW, VIC or QLD.

According to this survey the most common age when they left leave care was 16.

The majority of respondents left care with less than adequate schooling with 52% not even reaching Year 10.

Only 8% continued schooling upon leaving care and only 9% had a job to go to.

Schooling was not properly attended to whilst children were in care. Many were forced to move from one school to the next as they went from placement to placement. One Care Leaver commented **"I had the ability but not the opportunity"** and this is characteristic of many of the Care Leavers CLAN works with. Without self esteem or a stable family structure for many Care Leavers to fall back on, education becomes pivotal in their success after care. However, sadly this opportunity had been denied to too many Care Leavers. We all know the importance of education, but for many who were denied it, a legacy of multiple disadvantages becomes the outcome – this includes trouble with literacy, difficulties finding and maintaining a job and even being forever in a lower socio-economic bracket. Therefore it is essential that the current child welfare system ensures that all children in care have adequate schooling at the right stage of their development. This requires children to be given continual stability and emotionally stable environments so they can focus on their education. This preparation is vital for children to succeed once leaving care, both in life and in establishing meaningful and lasting relationships.

Furthermore it is alarming how many children upon leaving care spent their first night alone, on the streets or with strangers, 21% percent of respondents either returned to their parents upon leaving care OR they spent the first night alone, on the streets or with strangers. This shows the careless attitude with which children were discharged from care. There was no research carried out to make sure children had some where to go before they left care. Children were provided with no support or assistance at this stage to ensure that their ongoing needs were met. In fact only 2% of respondents said that they had an adequate sum of money to tide them over and only 10% left with enough clothes and personal requirements. As one Care Leaver said, they left with "No clothes, no money, no assistance". Children were provided with no leaving care plan to work out where they would go or who they would stay with, if they would continue schooling or get a job.

On the other hand many children were sent back to their parents when they shouldn't have been, resulting in the same negative outcomes as if they were left alone. For example many respondents commented that they were sent back to an abusive mother or father and one respondent said, "I was sent back to my parents but then ran away due to violence at home".

As it can be seen from these survey results, there was no preparation for these children to leave care, no support, and no assistance. Before children leave care all options need to be considered and the child's wishes need to be taken into account. As it is evidenced, parents are not always the right people for children to return to and if they aren't, all measures must be taken to make sure that they have somewhere to go. It is not only important that children have adequate schooling but it is also the job of the child protection system to teach children life skills and job skills also. For those children who struggle academically it is important that they have necessary skills and training to find a job once they leave care (if not before). Furthermore leaving care should be a transition where support and assistance are provided every step of the way. Children cannot be expected to change in the period of one day and be suddenly capable of coping out of the environment of the care system. Children leaving care need support, all at least until the age of 25, as is the norm for most children in regular families. Many of the most damaged, physically and psychologically, will continue to need support throughout their lifetime. Anything less than this is a violation of their human rights. If these things are not done then the legacy of leaving care unprepared will follow with a lifetime of social exclusion and disadvantage.

I would like to touch briefly on the issue of teaching life skills. It is important that children who have come from broken families are taught and learn many of the things that they would normally rely on their parents to teach them. Many of these things are more subtle than we realise, like teaching children how to form attachments, how to maintain relationships, how to trust others and of course how to give and receive love. It is not surprising to learn that 17% of respondents to the CLAN survey stated that their parents or grandparents had been in care and 13% have had their own children placed in care.

It is also interesting to note that 54 respondents commented that they chose not to have children. These statistics show us that Care Leavers do experience difficulties with knowing how to parent due to a lack of suitable role models and their own experience with trust, attachment and bonding. Another group of Care Leavers won't even attempt a relationship with 12% having difficulties forming and maintaining close relationships. These intergenerational effects of care need to be dealt with immediately as a risk factor. All children in care should be given continual counselling to address any trauma, trust, or attachment issues they may have arisen before going into care or may be a result of care, before the cycle repeats itself again.

People who grow up in 'care' also need to be aware that a childhood in care makes them no less valuable than their peers, that they aren't second class citizens as many of us older Care Leavers feel – and that there is no reason whatsoever for them to feel shame as a result of growing up in a Home. If support and assistance is given to Care Leavers throughout their lifetime we know they will grow up to be fully functioning adults capable of contributing to society and able to successfully form relationships and raise a family.

As I have said repeatedly throughout this presentation Care Leavers suffer disadvantage and social exclusion from not having adequate preparation, support and assistance to leave care. According to

the Social Inclusion Board a person who falls into at least 3 of 6 named categories are multiply disadvantaged. If a person experiences these disadvantages for more than 2 years they are experiencing 'Entrenched Disadvantage'. The CLAN survey covered these 6 areas of disadvantage and came up with the following results:

1. 59% of respondents lived in a household where no one is employed and 20% have been unemployed for longer than 2 years.
2. 53% of respondents could not raise \$2000 in a week to deal with an emergency which according to the social inclusion board is considered a strong indicator of disadvantage.
3. 64% of respondents could not get help from outside their household in times of crisis which indicates isolation from the community.
4. 60% of respondents assessed their physical health as being fair, poor or very poor and 57% assessed their mental health as falling into the same categories.
5. As mentioned earlier more than 50% of respondents did not get a chance to finish year 10 at high school.
6. Lastly 19% of respondents would not feel safe at home alone after dark compared with 7% of the general population.

It can be seen from these results that many Care Leavers are multiply disadvantaged and perhaps also are experiencing entrenched disadvantage. Furthermore these results indicate social exclusion and isolation from the greater community.

In addition to the disadvantages outlined by the Social Inclusion Board, there are further clear indicators of disadvantage. 14% of our respondents never married and 52% now live alone. 54% of our respondents do not own their place of residence and 36% are on a disability pension while 34% are on an aged pension. Comments like the following were prevalent: "I was ill for many years due to the treatment from the system - I lost a lot of income".

Moreover 12% of respondents acknowledged that they have serious psychological problems stemming from their childhood in care. A further 15% have trouble trusting those in authority and 10% have or have had a drug and alcohol problem.

In conclusion, it is evident that the Care Leavers in our large sample suffer from multiple disadvantages, social exclusion and isolation. Many of these disadvantages could have been avoided had the welfare system given them proper preparation to leave care as well as support and assistance to do so. The majority of Care Leavers in our survey did not receive adequate schooling whilst in the welfare system, nor did they receive counselling to help them deal with the range of emotional or psychological problems they were suffering. They were not taught life skills and they were discharged from care recklessly in many instances having no place to go, no money, no clothes and no family. There were no support people there to provide assistance as they transitioned to the real world. The damaged children became damaged adults.

CLAN hopes that the results of our research can help policy makers understand the mistakes of the past and the lasting impact of these mistakes to ensure that the current policy is adapted to provide adequate preparation, support and assistance for children to successfully leave care.

So, let's learn from our history, because when it comes to leaving care, we've been there.